

Marine closer to

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COURIER TIMES

WASHINGTON — A Vietnam veteran from Newtown will get another shot at earning the nation's highest military honor.

In the latest chapter of a 34-year-old story, Congressman Jim Greenwood, R-8, met with Secretary of the Navy Gordon R. England on Thursday to secure a review of 53-year-old Richard Gresko's case.

In the Vietnam conflict, he was Lance Cpl. Richard Gresko, a 19-year-old Marine from Philadelphia. In March 1970, Gresko threw his body atop an

enemy hand grenade to protect three of his fellow Marines.

He survived, although seriously wounded, and spent almost two years in the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, recovering the use of his legs.

After his injury in Vietnam, Gresko's commanding officer recommended the Marine for a Medal of Honor, the nation's highest recognition for valor awarded in the name of Congress. He sent Gresko's paperwork up the chain, but it somehow got overlooked. Six years passed before Gresko received his honor. It did not come in the form of a Medal of Honor, but rather the Navy Cross, the second highest

getting top honor

award a Marine can receive.

A host of elected officials and local veterans have worked for 20 years to correct what they see as a grievous oversight.

England assured Greenwood that a panel of Vietnam-era officers would review Gresko's case and make a recommendation. He told Greenwood that he would accept the panel's opinion.

If the verdict supports a Medal of Honor, the next steps would be approval by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Joint Chiefs of Staff and the president, who awards it in the name of Congress.

Greenwood was optimistic after his

meeting. He said, "It doesn't hurt" to have a member of Congress advocating a case, but noted that clout alone wasn't enough to make past attempts successful.

"The facts have to speak for themselves," he said. "These medals should not be for political reasons."

Previous efforts by the late U.S. Sen. Hugh Scott and Congressmen Robert Edgar and Robert A. Borski to reopen Gresko's file went nowhere because the Navy cannot review a medal award

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unless there is any new information.

Greenwood's submission to England included new eyewitness testimonies from two of the three men whose lives Gresko saved in Vietnam that night.

Bucks County Courier Times columnist Jerry Jonas and Dan Fraley, the county's director of veterans and military affairs, spent almost a year finding these men and gathering their statements. The men dug into decades-old military rosters to track down two of the three Marines, now living in Kansas and Texas.

Fraley said he was very encouraged by the new review and said this response is "far, far, far from the same old thing" that

happened with previous efforts to award Gresko the medal.

Forty-seven servicemen received a Medal of Honor for similar actions during the Vietnam War, including a man from Gresko's own regiment who jumped on a hand grenade the same night in 1970.

Overall, the military awarded fewer than 250 Medals of Honor for valor in Vietnam. Fewer than 50 of those recipients are living. According to Fraley, the only person from Bucks County to earn a Medal of Honor was for service during the Civil War.

Greenwood represents the residents of Bucks County, some districts of Abington, Upper Dublin and Upper Moreland in Montgomery County and two wards in Philadelphia.

Allecia Vermillion, who writes for the Medill News Service in Washington, can be reached at news@phillyburbs.com.

Timeline

March 11, 1970: While serving in Vietnam, Lance Cpl. Richard Gresko throws himself on an enemy hand grenade, saving the lives of at least three nearby Marines.

November 1970: U.S. Sen. Hugh Scott takes up Gresko's cause, writing letters on the Marine's behalf to the Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

Oct. 15, 1973: President Nixon awards the Medal of Honor to another Marine who jumped on a grenade, Gunnery Sgt. Allan Jay Kellogg Jr.

Nov. 14, 1976: The U.S. Navy awards Gresko the Navy Cross, the Navy's highest award.

July 2003: Dan Fraley, Bucks County's director of military and veterans affairs, and Bucks County Courier Times columnist Jerry Jonas launch efforts to find eyewitnesses.

June 3, 2004: Congressman Jim Greenwood presents the gathered testimonies to Secretary of the Navy Gordon R. England. England promises a panel will review Gresko's case.